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ABSTRACT

In his novel "Small World," David Lodge lampoons the professional conference experience and satirizes the academic participants. One real-life conference-goer identifies herself with one of the main characters of the novel: she is a conference and professorial novitiate but a quick study. After attending a few conferences, she found herself flipping through the index to conference programs to choose who, instead of what, to listen to. To answer nagging questions about her own conference experience, she constructed fictional conversations between and among other conference participants from notes taken at the time. A part of the mystical, magical conference ethos (why a particular speaker's presence influences auditors) is unraveled by Louis Althusser's discussion of the dialectical interplay of subject and object and Ideological State Apparatuses. What conference-goers do, who they listen to, and who they read later have to do with the fact that they are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition. But to suggest that the academic conference functions as an Ideological State Apparatus, when many consider conferences as an honest and enriching part of their professional lives, is to make the ritual problematic. To see the conference as the site of ideology is to keep the institution in question, to hold it up to scrutiny. (RS)

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March 1991

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In the "Prologue" to his novel, Small World, David Lodge compares conference goers to Chaucerian pilgrims: "The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement" (1). And here we are, in Boston. We move, we travel, we keep motives pure. Lodge, however, recognizes that the metaphor extends, that "there are certain penitential exercises to be performed--the presentation of a paper, perhaps, and certainly listening to the papers of others" (1). The indulgences have their price. "And yet," says Lodge, "at the end of it all, [the conferees] return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind," and, I might add, a mention in the faculty bulletin.

Lampooning the conference experience and satirizing the academic participants is Lodge's main trope. The satire presents us with multi-national characters and settings, yet remains familiar to us all. Morris Zapp, Phillip Swallow, and Persse McGarrigle are the three central characters in the book: the first being the pragmatic American professor redolent with modern critical theory; the second, a British traditionalist, somewhat anal retentive; the third, a conference and professorial noviate, but a quick study. Morris Zapp is the old hand on the conference

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circuit, and to hear Morris tell of professional ambition is to hear a tale of cynicism:

> Of course, you had to be distinguished--by, for instance, having applied successfully for other, similar handouts, grants, fellowships and so on, in the past. That was the beauty of the academic life, as Morris saw it....All you needed to get started was to write one really damned good book--which admittedly wasn't easy when you were a young college teacher just beginning your career, struggling with a heavy teaching load....But on the strength of that one damned good book you could get a grant to write a second book in more favourable circumstances (172).

And then present those chapters, in varying form, at conference after conference. Slip a new word into the title. Get mileage.

Lodge's satire allows us to observe conference ethos through a fictional mirror. On one occasion, Morris, sitting next to Persse, admits to his intention to sleep through a paper; he wants his young friend, however, to wake him up "when Von Turpitz appears on the rostrum. You can't mistake him, he wears a black glove on one hand. Nobody knows why and nobody dares to ask him" (223). Now there's real conference ethos. Ultimately, though, for Morris, the conference circuit could become one extended global jaunt: "In theory, it was possible to wind up full professor while doing nothing except to be permanently absent on some kind of sabbatical grant or fellowship" (172).

Lodge also lampoons the travel that professional conferences necessitate. The behaviors of conference attendees, though

somewhat exaggerated, remain nonetheless recognizable:

> The whole academic world seems to be on the move. Half the passengers on transatlantic flights these days are university teachers. Their luggage is heavier than average, weighed down by books and papers--and bulkier, because their wardrobes must embrace both formal wear and leisure wear....For that's the attraction of the conference circuit: it's a way of converting work into play, combining professionalism with tourism, and all at someone else's expense. Write a paper and see the world. I'm Jane Austen--fly me! (262).

Not only does Lodge see these conference travelers, but he hears their voices: "The air is thick with the babble of these wandering scholars' voices, their questions, their complaints, advice, anecdotes. Which airline did you fly? How many stars does the hotel have?....Don't eat the salad here, they use human manure on the lettuce. Laker is cheap, but their terminal at L.A. is the pits" (262). [And I recall the bellmen at the Hyatt Regency in Chicago and their talk of "dissertations."]

And even if we've attended very few conferences, we've seen the "smirk" that Lodge identifies: a conference presenter gives "a speech in praise of somebody's book, though the smirk hovering round his lips seemed somehow to twist and devalue the sentiments they uttered, and to solicit knowing titters from the audience" (195).

Though David Lodge creates a conference scene that we may have experienced, and certainly one that we may smile or

smirk at, my own conference reality is the one that primarily interests me. I'm a Persse McGarrigle as conference goers go--new within the last three or so years, and a product of "instant nostalgia." But not very far into my conference career, I began to notice something happening. Instead of reading the conference program for areas of thematic interest, I found myself first going to the index, deciding which sessions to attend on the basis of "who" rather than "what." Once I had heard Ann Kaplan speak, she was a must-see. And those whom I had both read and seen were especially important to see once again. What was happening here? I consider myself resistant to the ethos of political speakers, evangelicals, and commercial pitches. My favorites, though, those I align myself with theoretically and pedagogically, are the people I have seen. Their conference ethos, their speaking selves, had wooed me.

Certain questions kept nagging at me: why were the presences of the people I had listened to so strong? Had I gone to conferences convinced of the rightness of my ideology and pedagogy, found the speakers who spoke that ideology, and been reconfirmed in that position? What did I come away with? Check marks in my conference program book and notes scribbled on envelopes, in margins, and when I was organized, yellow legal pads. And so I went back to envelopes of materials, handouts, correspondence from past conferences--my archives--and lifted presenters' names and pithy quotes to see whether what I had written had taught me anything.

Many voices speak in my notes. On occasion they seem to talk to one another. In order to make them speak today, I take

the liberty of constructing conversations, in the way that David Lodge might hear them speak at conferences after hours. Please understand that I am writing fiction from my notes, though fiction and fact often blur.

Late one evening I overheard Anne Berthoff, keynote speaker at the Literacy Conference at University of San Francisco in June of 1988, engaged in conversation with two of her colleagues, Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae. Berthoff spoke of I. A. Richards, indulged in a little Hirsch-bashing, and gave her pronouncements on "SEM-I-O-TICS," long I, long O. I overheard her tell the other two that we must treat "student writing as texts that require interpretation." In fact, "all knowledge is interpretation which is subject to interpretation."

"Yes," answered Bizzell, "but I still maintain that rhetoricians must recognize their Marxism. And that Marxism will allow resistance to shift from a solitary act to a social, communal resistance. The time has come for egalitarian teachers to inhabit authoritarian institutions."

At this point, David Bartholomae put down his drink, leaned forward and said, "Egalitarian concerns are mine, too, Pat. Historically, we have naturalized, valorized the perfect student discourse, and doing so, we have silenced students. And that repressed classroom needs the communal resistance that you speak of."

(Incidentally, my notes are scrawled on the back of a handout, from Bartholomae, I think, which is a reprint of Clifford Geertz's essay about the Balinese Cockfight.)

Now imagining a conversation between Berthoff, Bizzell, and Bartholomae is an easy task, and assuredly many have taken place. I want to imagine, though, Donald Murray relaxing over cocktails with Victor Vitanza: they might discuss the crisis of the self and self-expression, and metaphor might be a trope.

Murray admits that his "loyalty is to the text. The teacher is my text and revision is the faculty. I write to hear the not-yet-written text."

Vitanza: "Well, when I write, I often like to just `drift.' I sometimes think that I write in disrespect to the audience, that I treat them as victims of scopophilia. The issue is to be both Victor and vanquished."

Murray: "Don't you wonder sometimes, Victor, whether the text instructs delay, whether it teaches immaturity?"

"Maybe it does, maybe it does. I often imagine myself a child, sitting in the planetarium, staring at the ceiling. It's all a polyverse of discourse."

Kenneth Bruffee, walking by, stops at their table and offers his cribbed advice on teaching: "I teach straying from me. Polyverse complicates things, doesn't it, Victor? Instead of learning to `quack' fundamentalist jargon, are we learning to speak in a non-fundamentalist, different way? Mightn't we learn to `peep,' or `squeak,' or `moo'?"

At last year's 4Cs, where "Erasmus hats" were in fashion, I found myself in Berghof's, that fine Chicago establishment, where some of the conferees had gathered. Elizabeth Flynn was reminding her tablemates that "we're moving from a cognitive paradigm to a social one."

"Whether we are shifting to a social paradigm or not, the problem remains that even the left splits around a remedy for racism, sexism." It was Michele Fine answering Flynn's assertion. "The study I conducted last year on the victimization of women showed just that--that women make good victims. They make excuses for their attackers and write about the victimization as if they had white male cataracts."

Susan Jarrett: "It all has to do with positionality. Gender construction and historicized fluid movement."

Robert J. Connors, wanting to introduce his latest interest, took up the conversational thread: "Gender issues are being addressed. But archives for composition materials are nowhere near what they should be. I'm wondering whether either any of you, at your own universities, could help me with archiving what I call `pedagogical ephemera.'"

"We're doing something akin to that in California, Bob. We're working as teacher/researchers to produce knowledge out of archived student writing," added Mike Rose.

And isn't that the essence of the conference thing? To sample what speakers have to say is to get the low-down on who's who and who's saying what by quoting whom.

And cultural studies seemed to be central to the most recent MLA in Chicago. Gilbert and Grubar present a satirical "meta-mini series" of their own in which they vanquish Helen Vendler, while they spoof the discipline and develop a "fetishization of American scholars." Stanley Aronowitz recaps cultural studies, links Bakhtin to cultural studies, and adds in the affective

thing: for Aronowitz cultural studies bridges disciplines, blurs distinctions, for "we've never inhabited two distinct worlds, the rational and the irrational."

One voice, though, that has eluded my best efforts at fictional conversation is that of Jacques Derrida. Not only did I not know how to fit Derrida's voice in with the others, I did not know quite what to do with the notes that I produced, except to save them. I took copious notes that night at Loyola of Chicago, worrying because when my hand was jotting, my neighbor's was still; yet when he wrote, I did not. What did he know that I didn't? Were we hearing the same voice speaking to us?
In order to introduce such a presence as Jacques Derrida, the faculty member from Loyola made a little joke that he had originally read the paper in its 25 page version and recommended some cuts. After revising, the essay turned into 130 pages! Derrida's hour-long presentation turned into three; and listeners heard Derrida's voice at length. During this seminar, Derrida presented his thesis on "Heidegger's Ear," using the ear as metonym for friendship. "No ear without friend, no friend without ear." There's another metonym: No voice without ear.

Because of my own penchant for hearing and archiving, I can construct a sort of history; I can begin to get a sense of what the discipline looks like, who reads what and who might talk to whom and what theory seems to carry weight at any given time. Still, why does a particular speaker/writer gain my esteem and my loyalty? How does ethos, the speaker's presence influence me, the auditor? Roland Barthes explains that "the [speaker's] voice is a diffusion, an insinuation, it passes over the entire surface

of the body, the skin; and being a passage, an abolition of limitations, classes, names, it possesses a special hallucinatory power" (/Z 110). The speaker's ethos, the voice, washes over me, envelops me, makes me see and hear what might not be there. I am in its power. Hearing the speaker's voice makes me suspend disbelief; class lines fade and I am a willing subject. Terry Eagleton, too, reminds me of what I forget when in the presence of a conference ethos: "The ego is a function or effect of a subject which is always dispersed, never identical with itself, strung out along the chains of the discourses which constitute it" (169). The speaker pretends a logo-centric self-presence, and I believe in it.

Eagleton and Barthes clear up some of what has nagged at me about the mystical, magical conference ethos, but it is Louis Althusser who unravels much of the dilemma. Althusser does the Marxist thing as he explains subject position and Ideological State Apparatuses. Out of the dialectical interplay of subject and object and mirroring, subjectivity amounts to a free embrace of the subject position--that we allow ourselves, become a party to, the interpellation of the subject. What we do at conferences, who we listen to, and who we read later have to do with the fact that

> you and I are <u>always</u> <u>already</u> subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects (245).

We believe that we are always already subjects and academic conferences reinforce that belief; conference rituals naturalize the belief in a unified, knowable self. When Althusser speaks of ideology and the practices, the rituals that keep ideology in place, the imaginary representation of our ideas of ourselves, I cannot but make the connection between those rituals and our conference behaviors. For Althusser, over time ideas disappear, only to leave behind residue that is "inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus....prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual" (244). And aren't our conferences evidence of ritual practices, material ritual practices? And isn't it possible that academic conferences, in spite of the good work and moral intent that shape them, are themselves Ideological State Apparatuses that interpellate the subject?

In order to concretize his theory, Althusser personifies Christian religion, in order to get ideology to "speak." David Lodge's novel has accomplished much the same thing with academic conferences. I am the spectator, listener, the ear; I see the specular image; I do some mirroring; I see the speaker seeing me. The mirror structure that Althusser defines ensures three things: 1.) the interpellation of individuals as subjects; 2.) the subject's subjection to the Subject; 3.) mutual recognition, between subjects and Subject.

When I choose who to listen to, I am engaging in the interpellation of myself as subject. I posit the speaker as Subject, with an upper case S; I recognize the difference between the two and agree to my subjection. I know it and it is obvious

to me. "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the `still small voice of conscience'): `That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'" (245). Patricia Bizzell speaks to me of Marxism and it's of course obvious that she's speaking to a real person--me!

The speaking subject at the conference is much like the Althusserian police officer who hails a subject. When on the street, one might hear someone calling out from behind, "Hey, you!" The listener believes "that `it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else)" (245-246). We've all seen motorists pull over when a squad car flips on its flashing lights--we're ready to be the subject of the chase. "Experience shows that the practical telecommunications of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him being hailed" (246). Althusser also suggests that "ideology `acts' or `functions' in such a way that it `recruits' subjects among the individuals" (245). "Uncle Sam wants YOU!" the WW II poster proclaimed, and the recruits answered the call. The "hey, you there!" works.

But to suggest that the academic conference functions as an Ideological State Apparatus, when many consider conferences an honest and enriching part of their professional lives, is to make the ritual problematic. Ideology resides, though, where it is most invisible. To see the conference as the site of ideology is

to keep the institution in question, is to hold it up to scrutiny.

That, I think, is David Lodge's intention, and mine. To satirize the most sacred rite of the discipline is to keep it healthy. Today, of course, my subject position is Subject, upper case S. Ever the satirical mirror.

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